

AMERICA SEEN

British and American Nineteenth Century Travels in the United States

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Abstract

The thesis discusses the development of nineteenth century responses to the United States. It hinges upon the premise that travel writing is narrative and that the travelling itself must therefore be constructed (or reconstructed) as narrative in order to make it available for writing. By applying narratology to the work of literary travel writers from Frances Trollope to Henry James I show the influence of travelling point of view and writing point of view on the narrative. Where these two points of view are in conflict I suggest reasons for this and identify signs in the narrative which display the disparity.

There are several influences on point of view which are discussed in the thesis. The first is mode of travel: the development of steamboats and later locomotives increasingly divested travellers from the landscape through which they were travelling. I concentrate on Frances Trollope, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain travelling by boat, and Robert Louis Stevenson and Henry James travelling by rail to examine how mode of travel alters travelling point of view and influences the form of travel writing. The second is the frontier: writing from a liminal space creates a certain point of view and makes travel not only a passage but a rite of passage. I examine travel texts which discuss the Western frontier as well as the transatlantic frontier. As the opportunity for these frontier experiences diminished through the spread of American culture and developments in travel technology, so the point of view of the traveller changes. A third point of view is provided by European ideas of nature and beauty in nature. The failure of these when put against American landscapes such as the Mississippi, prairies, and Niagara forms a significant part of the thesis, the fourth chapter of which examines writing on Niagara Falls in guidebooks and the travel texts of Frances Trollope, Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Anthony Trollope, Twain and James. Other points of view include seeing the United States through earlier travel texts and adopting a more autobiographical interest in travelogues.

In the final chapter the thesis contains a discussion of the nature of truth in travel writing and the tendency towards fictionalisation. The thesis concludes by considering the implications for truth of having various travelling and writing points of view impact upon constructing narrative out of travel.

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